

ABOUT **ESER**

Reviewing the Research on Improving Employment Outcomes for Low-Income Adults

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Systematic evidence reviews can support evidence based decisions. They assess the strength of the evidence in large numbers of complex research studies and summarize their findings.

The Issue

U.S. workers with economic and material disadvantages and limited work experience often have difficulty finding and keeping gainful employment. Targeted employment and training interventions can help these workers gain a foothold in the labor market and improve their employment and earnings potential.

How Research Reviews Can Help

Policy-makers and program operators need evidence about what works. However, decision-makers do not always know where to find information about evidence or how to make sense of it. In addition, not all evidence is of equal strength. Systematic evidence reviews assess the strength of the evidence in complex research studies and summarize their findings. Reviews identify programs and strategies that have been shown to be effective through rigorous evaluation. They can support evidence based decisions by distilling the findings from the most trustworthy research.

About the Review

The Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review (ESER) is a systematic review of research on employment and training programs for low-income individuals. The goal of the review is to identify programs and services that help low-income adults get and keep jobs and, ultimately, become self-sufficient. The review provides a transparent, systematic assessment of the quality of research evidence supporting approaches to improve employment-related outcomes. Results can be used by practitioners, policy-makers, researchers, and the public. The review is conducted by Mathematica Policy Research for the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Systematic reviews follow several steps. First, researchers define the scope of the review and set criteria for eligible studies. Then, they conduct a thorough search of the research literature to identify all relevant studies. The research team then examines the findings of studies that have the strongest evidence. Based on this information, the team can then draw conclusions about the overall impacts of a program, policy, or practice. Using objective, rigorous, and standardized techniques ensures that the findings of the review are free from bias.

The Systematic Review Process





Studies are assigned a **High, Medium, or Low** rating that reflects the strength of evidence they provide.

Reports that synthesize the findings of the review in specific topic areas are planned for early 2016. More information on the project will be available at employmentstrategies.acf.hhs.gov in fall 2015. For more information, please contact eser@acf.hhs.gov

Study Eligibility

To be eligible for review by ESER, studies need to meet a specific set of criteria. The research must:

- Quantitatively measure the effectiveness of a program or strategy
- Be published since 1990

Each employment program or strategy needs to meet these standards:

- Aim to improve employment-related outcomes
- Serve low-income adults
- Take place in the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom

Identify Studies

The research team used a three-pronged approach to conduct a literature search for studies and interventions meeting these eligibility requirements. The search consisted of:

- Systematically searching research databases and websites
- Culling citations from existing literature reviews reference lists
- Circulating a call for papers

Defining and Rating Strength of Evidence

“Strength of evidence” refers to how strongly the study’s methods support the conclusion that its estimates of the impact of a program or strategy are caused by that program or strategy, and not by something else.

ESER assigns a High, Medium, or Low rating to each study reviewed. To determine the rating, ESER uses a comprehensive set of review standards.

The standards focus on whether the treatment group, which was offered a program or strategy, and the comparison group, which could not receive the treatment, were similar before the program began. The two groups must have been either formed by a random process or shown to be similar on several pre-program characteristics in order for a study to rate high or moderate.

Presenting Findings

ESER findings are presented in a searchable database (employmentstrategies.acf.hhs.gov) that includes all of the eligible studies reviewed. Users can access the information from the database in two ways.

1. Users can search for studies that match their interests, such as studies of programs that include case management, increase long-term employment, or support welfare recipients.
2. The database also contains individual study profiles providing details about each study and the programs and strategies it examined.